AMAZING GRACE
Galatians 2:15-21
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Christianity rests on the unlikely and improbable proposition that Almighty God, creator of all that is, loves us and has saved us eternally through the death of his son. The irreduceable assertion of Christianity is that God loves totally, without conditions, with no strings attached: whether we're good or not so good, whether we are liberal or conservative, rich or poor, whether we spend Sunday morning in church or on a golf course or in bed. The essence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is an amazing assertion about God's grace and it will not be qualified or reduced by our need to be reasonable.

Religion, on the other hand, is largely a human attempt to be reasonable with God, to strike a fair bargain: God's love in return for our goodness; a quantity of divine favor as it were, in exchange for a reasonable amount of moral behavior on our part.

Christianity is an assertion too good to be true about a grace that can only be called amazing. Religion is what happens to grace when people think about it for very long. And therein lies a story, a significant portion of which occurred in the first century in the cities of Galatia, which we know today as Turkey.

An impetuous, brilliant new Christian by the name of Saul of Tarsus took another name and headed North from Jerusalem. When Paul reached the Northwest corner of the Mediterranean he turned left into what was known as Galatia, after the tribes of Celtic people who lived there, the Gauls. It was the fourth decade of the first century. All the Christians in the world - and that wasn't very many - were Jews. The Celtic people in Galatia were what was indelicately described as heathen.

Paul told the story of Jesus and enough of them believed to be organized into churches in the Galatian cities. And then the conservatives, in Jerusalem, heard about it and sent out their truth squads to correct the errors Paul had made. "You must adhere to this law", they told the Galatian Christians who still looked a lot like heathens. They didn't care about ritual cleanliness, they ate pork and treated Friday night like any other night. "In order to be a Christian, you must keep the law of Moses." The Galatians, of course had never heard of Moses, but many of them, for the best of reasons, began furiously to try to reorder their lives on the basis of his law.

Now Paul, a scholar, a lawyer, a Roman citizen, and a fighter - got angry. In the midst of the confusion about what makes a person a Christian, all the goodness and joy and laughter was lost. All the freedom disappeared and Christianity looked amazingly like every other religion: a grim device by which individuals ingratiate themselves with God. So he wrote his angry letter to those Galatian Christians, and it is called the Magna Charta of Christian freedom and its theological foundation is this amazing grace which is at the heart of it all.

He is echoed by John Naisbitt in the book everyone is talking about, Megatrends. Having defined and illustrated the ten major trends which are already radically changing our life, Naisbitt adds an intriguing postscript:

> "We are living in the time of the parenthesis," he says, "the time between eras. It is though we have bracketed off the present from both the past and future, for we are neither here nor there. We have not left behind the America of the past.....But we have not embraced the future either. We have done the human thing; we are clinging to the known past in fear of the unknown future..." (p. 249)

"There are giants up ahead", the Israelite spies reported. "They're so big, we felt like grasshoppers." The story, in the 13th and 14th chapters of the Book of Numbers is marvelous. The tribes of Israel had finished three decades of wandering through the wilderness. Now they stood on the very border of Canaan, the promised land. Moses sent out a party of spies to survey this new place. They returned, after 40 days, having done their intelligence assignment thoroughly. They brought back samples of grapes and pomegranites and figs. They reported that the land was flowing with milk and honey. But there was something else in the land as well: some fortified cities and some very fierce-looking people. At the end of the initial report, Caleb, their spokesman, suggested that they get on with it; that they conquer the land. But the other spies offer a dissenting opinion. Now, the people of the land are not simply sturdy - "they are stronger than we are", besides "that country will swallow up anybody who tries to conquer it." And then, working up a real head of steam, "as a matter of fact, those people up there are giants - compared to them we're nothing but a bunch of grasshoppers." And the whole company spent the night worrying and wringing their hands and weeping. And they complained to Moses and Aaron, and said that, given a choice, they would rather die of old age in their beds in Egypt, even as slaves, than in this god-forsaken place. And they even started to talk about replacing Moses and Aaron with a leadership team which was a little more conservative, more realistic, one that knew that grasshoppers are no match for giants.

William Sloane Coffin, commenting on this story, says: "While love seeks truth, fear seeks safety. and fear distorts the truth, not by exaggerating the ills of the world (which would be difficult) but by underestimating our ability to deal with them." (p. 60, Courage to Love)

Well, there are obstacles up ahead and sometimes they look like giants. The lead article in the recent Futurist Magazine is "Do We Owe Anything to Future Generations?" It lists the issues with which this present generation of Americans must deal, if there is to be a future for our children's children: you know them by heart: energy, population, environment, etc. etc. Naisbitt asks - Do we have the courage - the innovative ability to venture forward into the future?

The President of Alma College told me recently that the new survey of freshman attitudes reveals general cynicism about the future. Unlike their predecessors, what freshmen want - this survey reveals - is not peace, an end to hunger, racial justice, or a better world - but a bigger piece of the financial pie. But the most disturbing thing of all, the President said, is that their parents are welcoming this general lowering of expectations, this end of idealism - with sighs of relief. The worst thing of all, he said, is that their parents regard the end of idealism as a good idea.

But the pendulum swinging in the opposite direction is not much better. Religion which paints the human condition a rosy hue; which simply refuses to deal with evil and offers cheerful smiles and admonitions to think positively, may be a pleasant way to spend an hour a week but it is dishonest and irrelevant and silly. University of Chicago scholar Martin Marty has written a remarkable Lenten piece in which he suggests "Guilt of nameless, faceless, ill-focussed sorts has never fallen in short supply. People in whole industries, equipped with couches and staffed by professionals with medical credentials, minister to those who feel guilt. Some of those people are religious...some are not. The results in both cases are similar. They both live lives haunted by yesterday, under the lengthened shadow of parents whose demands they never met or could meet. These victims are torn apart by words snapped cruelly at spouses, promises too easily made in love and too readily broken in hatred..." (Christianity and Crisis, 2/21/83, "Of Winter in the Heart")

Sigmund Freud taught that guilt is born in the mind of the child whose parents scold him and it continues throughout a life-time of anxiety about losing that parental approval. We all know a little bit about that.

Alfred Adler taught that guilt is rooted in deception which all people engage in. We know we aren't what we pretend to be and we experience guilt because we deceive others. We learn about that gradually, I think. We spend the first half of our lives feeling like we are more than we appear. And about half way through reality sets in and humility. And we know - hopefully with a grain of good humor - that we are less than we appear, sometimes, if not all the time. What a lesson in humanity to know that you can never be as wise and strong as you used to think and as your youngsters persist in thinking you are.

Karl Jung said we experience guilt because we can't acknowledge our "shadow selves", and Paul Tournier wrote that "numerous illnesses, and even accidents are a form of punishment which the sufferer administers to himself." (Guilt and Grace, page 174)

But it was Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber who was most helpful by differentiating between neurotic guilt which can be treated therapeutically and reduced by understanding, and real guilt which can only be acknowledged and forgiven. Real guilt, Buber said, is a problem of religion, not medicine.

The Bible isn't embarrassed at all to relate guilt to sin, not sin as a laundry list of small mistakes but sin as the human condition, the lostness, the missing of the mark which is simply a part of our humanity. There was a time when progressive people looked forward to the end of all that business, when educated people would be free of primitive notions of sin and the guilt which derives from them. It has not happened. in fact, the modern era has documented without question, the lostness of our humanity. Enlightenment not only didn't eliminate sin, it made efficient operations out of Auschwitz and Hiroshima.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the assertion that human need is met by God's love. Christianity is the assertion that the worst of our humanity is met, not by tight rules, but by the love of God, poured out in the life of one who died on a cross.

potential includes appliances that are wearing out, children growing up and away from us, jobs that look a little less permanent and a lot less satisfying than they used to, the loss of a good overhead smash and the universal dynamic described gently as "the aging process". Sometimes the litany of the future sounds so frightening that we reach, intentionally into the past to hold on a bit longer. Sometimes we try to parent too long, or hit the ball too hard, or drink too much, or have an affair which will help us recover what we think we must be to affirm that we are alive.

The future is, for all of us, only partially unknown. Some of us will have to cope with major life crises. Some of us will have to change our life styles: all of us must live through whatever future is given to us.

The good news is that God's own son has come among us and lived through his own future with determination and faithfulness and hope. The good news of Jesus Christ is that the very worst the future could do, did not end his father's love: for him, nor even his own life. The good news of the gospel is always, incredibly - a word of hope about the future.

Because of the incarnation - God loving this world so much that he came to live in it: and because of resurrection - the life of God so strong that death does not defeat it, Christianity is always hopelessly in love with the present and hopelessly optimistic about the future.

The Christ of the New Testament will not allow his disciples to build a monument on the mountain side: will not allow Peter to stay up there away from the crowd; will not, that is to say, allow his people to cling to the past.

The Christ whose name we claim - calls us - as church - as people - to follow him down into the future.

My favorite metaphor for God uses the future tense. God is not only God of the past, but the God of the future. God is not only the father of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Jesus - he is father of my children and their children and their children and of countless generations ahead. God creates, I love to remind myself - not as a push from behind, but as a pull from ahead.

Of course there are obstacles. Of course they look like giants sometimes. But what a mistake to try to return to the safety of the past. What a mistake to conclude that compared to those problems up there, we're nothing more than grasshoppers. God is up there, too - in that future. He calls us into it - as nation - as church - as men and women: to live with joyful obedience - which means hope. AMEN.